

EVALUATION ABSTRACT: THE EVALUATION OF PEER GROUP CONNECTION IN RURAL NORTH CAROLINA AND NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK

Grantee

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Intervention Name

Peer Group Connection

Intervention Description

Peer Group Connection (PGC) is a school-based, cross-age, group peer mentoring program for 9th-grade students designed to facilitate the transition into high school and improve non-cognitive abilities (for example, grit, decision making skills, goal-setting skills), student engagement, and educational outcomes. The program leverages existing resources, such as school staff, parents, and student leaders, to create a supportive environment for new high school students that encourages them to attend school, set personal goals, work hard, and make healthy decisions. By offering additional support to 9th-grade students, the program seeks to mitigate problems often associated with the transition into high school, such as disengagement from school, absenteeism, declines in academic performance, and engagement in risk behaviors. Although PGC is not explicitly a sexual health or teen pregnancy prevention program, the belief is that by engaging 9th-grade students in school, building connectedness among peers, and building students' decision making and goal-setting skills, PGC will encourage students to make healthier decisions, including reducing sexual risk-taking and increasing protective behaviors.

PGC requires the integration of several key groups that work together to ensure the peer mentoring program is implemented as intended: (1) a stakeholder team consisting of faculty members, parents, and students who work together to make programmatic decisions and incorporate the program into the school; (2) faculty advisors, selected by the stakeholder team, who are trained to run the program and teach a daily leadership course to peer leaders; and (3) 11th- and 12th-grade peer leaders who are trained in a daily leadership development class and facilitate the 9th-grade peer mentoring program.

Although the peer mentoring component of PGC is adjustable to meet the particular requirements of a school, typically the program begins with a full-day retreat during which faculty advisors and peer leaders introduce 9th-grade participants to PGC goals and expectations. Then around the third week of the school year, 9th-grade participants begin attending weekly peer group outreach sessions led by older peer leaders. Outreach sessions occur during regularly scheduled classes (participants are pulled from their classes to attend); they include hands-on activities, simulations, and discussions intended to build group cohesion and improve the decision making skills of group members. Topics include the importance of showing up to class, sharing cultures and backgrounds, learning effective communication skills, and how to set and effectively reach goals. PGC can occur in either a half-year (semester) or full-year format. In either format, a minimum of 18 45-minute outreach sessions are expected to be offered to PGC participants during the course of their 9th-grade year.

Comparison Condition

Business as usual

Comparison Condition Description

The comparison condition is "business as usual," consisting of normally scheduled classes or activities (for example, Physical Education/Health class, elective class, or homeroom period) assigned to comparison group participants during the period the PGC outreach pullout occurs. Comparison group participants will therefore receive more time in the regularly scheduled class than the treatment group, but there will be no alternative program or additional activities offered to the participants assigned to the comparison group. Although normally scheduled classes or activities might include sexual or reproductive health information, school administrators have confirmed that PGC outreach will occur in classes and on days only when no sexual or reproductive health components are taught. Therefore, exposure to sexual health content should be equal between treatment and comparison group participants.

Behavioral Outcomes

Sexual initiation, frequency of sexual intercourse, and number of sexual partners

Non-behavioral Outcomes

Connectedness among peers; competence in peer relationships; school engagement and attachment; self-efficacy in peer interactions; self-efficacy in goal setting and decision making skills; growth mindset; grit; educational aspirations; educational outcomes (for example, drop out, suspension, on-time grade promotion); intentions to practice safe sex (that is, use contraceptives, refuse unprotected sex, limit number of sexual partners); subjective norms concerning sex

Sample and Setting

High schools participating in the study serve large populations of economically disadvantaged and minority students in communities with high teenage birth rates. In North Carolina, partner schools are located in rural areas, some with substantial Hispanic populations, and in New York City, partner schools are located in urban areas and serve largely Hispanic, African American, and other minority populations.

Four basic eligibility criteria have been established for participation in the study. To be eligible for enrollment into the study, students must: (1) be enrolled at a study school; (2) provide parental consent and personal assent to participate in the study; (3) meet basic requirements for data collection (students must have the ability to complete a self-administered Participant Questionnaire, which is available in English and Spanish, in a classroom or group setting, unassisted, in 60 minutes or less.); and (4) be entering the 9th grade for the first time. Staff will screen all incoming 9th graders enrolled in a study school for eligibility. The sample will include eligible youth enrolled in the study; in all, the expectation is that approximately 1,600 9th graders will enroll in the study over the implementation period.

Research Design and Data Collection

The study is an individual randomized controlled trial in which eligible, consenting 9th-grade participants who volunteer to be pulled out of their regularly scheduled classes are randomly assigned by the evaluator to intervention (PGC) or control (business as usual) groups at a one-to-one ratio. The unit of assignment is the individual, and random assignment occurs after obtaining evaluation consent and assent and before the provision of any programming or collection of baseline data. Study participants are not informed that they are in the treatment or comparison group before baseline data collection. However, it is likely that some students will be aware of their PGC participation status before baseline data collection. In many schools, students will receive their schedules before baseline, and the schedules will include notation that a class is a PGC pullout class.

Youth in the intervention and comparison groups will receive a baseline survey and youth enrolled in the 2016-17 school year will receive a 12-month follow-up survey. Baseline data collection occurs during the fall of their 9th-grade year (before the provision of any PGC programming); follow-up data collection occurs during the fall of the 10th-grade year and will only be completed for study participants enrolled during the 2016-17 school year due to the shortened project period ending June 2018. In-school data collection is the preferred method of data collection for all data collection time points. If students no longer attend the study school or miss all available make-up administrations, they are offered the questionnaire first through an online administration, and then through mail. If students no longer attending the school do not complete an online or mail questionnaire, evaluation staff will attempt to conduct a phone interview using an abbreviated version of the questionnaire. Data collection procedures are the same for treatment and comparison groups.

For the implementation evaluation, PGC program staff will collect data on fidelity and adaptations, attendance, and quality. Staff will collect these data through observation forms, questionnaires, and attendance logs. PGC program staff (Center for Supportive Schools) complete the observations forms, school staff and students complete questionnaires, and attendance records are obtained from the school and maintained by PGC program staff.

Schedule/Timeline

Enrollment began in April 2016 in North Carolina and June 2016 in New York and will end in the fall 2017 for both locations. Baseline data collection began in August 2016 and will end in fall 2017. The 12-month follow-up data collection will occur in fall 2017 for youth who enrolled during the 2016-17 school year.

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